Syllabus as Manifesto: A Critical Approach to Classroom Culture

http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/syllabus-manifesto-critical-approach-classroom-culture/

August 28, 2014 / Adam Heidebrink-Bruno

Syllabi that reflect the mundane, bureaucratic requirements of the University are at risk of setting an equally banal classroom atmosphere. While administrative personnel may argue otherwise, the syllabus is not simply a contract between teacher and student. Rather, a syllabus should be a manifesto that serves as a founding document detailing the rights of the students and the pedagogy of the classroom.

Over time, the syllabus has become perfunctory. University policies and classroom expectations are the first impressions that we make in our classrooms. Using such a prescriptive approach to classroom culture, however, damages the social, cultural, and educative potential of formal schooling. To undo this harm, we must redefine the form and repurpose the syllabus as a space of cultural exchange. Only then can the artifact begin to enhance teaching-and-learning relationships within the classroom.

The listing of general course information is, of course, obligatory, and necessary for legal liability. Thus, syllabi typically include a course overview, prerequisites, grading and attendance policies, office hours, and an increasingly long list of "learning objectives," too often inscribed by distant administrators. The problem with the form arises when we share this information without its cultural and historical contexts. The content appears isolated and meaningless. And while an educator may quickly jot down that "participation is worth 20% of your grade" or "office hours by request," it is a wholly different experience to consider this rhetoric in relation to its implied ideologies.

For example, simply listing office hours frequently leads to a student-free office all year. It is a tragedy and a trend that dates back at least fifty years, when Paul Goodman observed much of the same behavior. Authentic, meaningful contact between teacher and student is often limited by the the bureaucracy of the institution and the increasingly difficult working conditions of the instructors. Further, without addressing the anxieties implicit in visiting an instructor, we can create social barriers to learning.

Goodman suggests that "scheduled office hours are also contactless, because they are structured to 'important questions,' something to justify taking the teacher's time" (The Community of Scholars). Accordingly, Goodman argues to simply be more present for informal chat. This is a great start. Furthermore, the syllabus may serve as an effective place to mitigate the student's potential fears and bridge the divide between students and teachers. Goodman's goal is to achieve more educative contact between adults and youth, particularly conversation not bound by a predetermined agenda. This, I believe, is a powerful form of learning. We must reassure our students that we are available, not only in form or "by appointment" or in a crisis, but truly available. We can use the syllabus as a place to show our understanding and compassion.

Grading, too, requires some demystification. Opinions on grading vary widely; however, many educators contend that grading can interfere with students' learning. Hidden beneath the surface of these debates lies the idea of "valuation." Valuation is the process that a society uses to measure particular values. Thus, how one culture assesses value deeply impacts how they evaluate. Yet, simplifying the "grading policy" on a syllabus to a mere mathematical chart effectively devalues any non-dominant form of valuation a student may hold.

Instead, we must acknowledge that everybody has a background in valuation, students and teachers alike. In building up towards a discussion of evaluation, John Dewey asserts that a student often "suffers from the conflict between doing what is really dear to him and what he has learned will win the approval of others." Grading is at the center of this conflict. When the student must decide between exploring a rather difficult curiosity and risk a poor grade, or choose a safe topic and ensure a good grade, the easier option often wins out. This effect is contrary to

learning. Yet these tensions are avoided when a professor dictates that "this is how grading is done." Definitive approaches to grading tend to reward lesser acts of accomplishment.

Furthermore, evaluation stems from the culturally dominant form of valuation at any given institution. Juha Suoranta and Tera Vaden outline two competing mindsets or cultures. In the first mindset, largely influenced by industrial views of production, "value is a function of scarcity." By contrast, the authors suggest a post-industrial, hacker-culture may see value as "a function of dispersion." When a professor prescribes a rubric or system of evaluation, it is tied to a system of cultural values, as well. Failing to address these cultural implications dismisses the importance and valuation of competing cultures.

If, for example, a professor assigns a task indicative of industrial values, a student immersed in a post-industrial worldview will have a difficult time understanding what is expected of him. Even if the language of the rubric is clear and precise, a cultural misunderstanding remains unmentioned, complicating the student's task. While this may appear a rather harmless generational misunderstanding, consider that the same holds true of other non-dominant cultural perspectives, e.g., indigenous cultural values are frequently undermined by Western archiving practices. The same is true of uncritical grading policies; too often grading is another instance of colonization. A thorough discussion of the history of academic values, code-switching, and power-dynamics is crucial to teaching across cultures.

Below, I have envisioned a radically different syllabus. In addition to a short list of the expected topics reimagined, there is a section entitled, "Rights of the Student." Here, I reaffirm essential human rights that have become hidden behind formalities and administrative procedure. Concepts such as accessibility and physical and emotional safety ought not, for the sake of humanity, be considered a "policy." Instead, I present these rights in the anarchist tradition of representing self-evident and self-governed humanitarian values. Together, teachers and students make up a single community as learners and, more importantly, as people.

Below, I have worked through many traditional sections of a common syllabus with a similarly critical perspective. I've chosen English 101 here as an example because, at most Universities, every degree-seeking student will be required to take this class shortly after beginning his or her college career; it serves not only as an introduction into college composition, but frequently into college itself. It is important to remember when designing syllabi for entry-level classes that any policy, expectation, or procedure referred to in abstracto will remain alien to the student. The cultural practices of the classroom need to be explained thoughtfully. The fact that so few educators are willing to discuss a syllabus in its entirety is an argument against its quality. In fact, those who write on syllabus design do not mention its cultural impact and focus on its clarity as an informational document, instead. They suggest layout, content, and policies, but never offer a critical examination of the rhetoric or imagine a purpose beyond the mundane. By contrast, then, a well-written syllabus should prove to be a useful educative artifact, embedded with rich cultural and political meaning worthy of much time and contemplation.

Often, critical pedagogy is critiqued as highly theoretical. It risks falling short of the emancipatory, progressive, or otherwise radical ideals it advances due to ineffective application. To challenge this notion, however, I offer a concrete example of what a syllabus could be, should one choose to change the status quo and unlock the potential of the form and redefine the syllabus as a powerful cultural artifact. My example below is an example what I will offer students in terms of a syllabus. While many of the headings may be consistent with one's expectations of the genre, the content serves a radically different function.

Students need a syllabus that is passionate, affirming, and understanding.

English 101: An Introduction to College Composition

Prerequisites

This course is an entry-level college class. As such, I assume that every student is entering with the writing and literacy competencies promised by high-school administrators and our University's admissions policy. However,

since these skills have been assessed by ever-changing regulatory state tests, there are many kinks in the system. In truth, we are all at various levels of achieving mastery of the written language. If you are concerned with your particular level of expertise, please see Office Hours for more information and additional skills-based support.

Course Overview

Welcome! Although many of you may be here due to University requirements, I hope that during the next sixteen weeks we will accomplish a good deal more than simply acquiring necessary credits. Imagine that we are human agents pursuing a better understanding of the world. Together, we will learn more about how literacy affects (and sometimes dictates) our place in the world.

Other classes may have a more obvious link to your future career goals and ambitions. Few, however, will have such an enduring focus on your relationship to words. Language is powerful; so powerful, in fact, that it can both create and destroy worlds. If you have ever been in love or fought with a parent, you know this is true. In here, we will critique the politics of language, practice adapting our own language for various power-structures, and discuss the ethics and cultural implications of these actions.

It is easy for academic subjects to become abstract and meaningless to students. I resent this practice and so I strive to share with you a practical and personally meaningful education. At the same time, I am responsible for balancing the desires of the University, the influences of economic forces, and the mandates of the government with my personal teaching style. This is not easy. Each collective member of the classroom must advocate for his or her own needs. With your help, I hope to never lose track of what's truly important: our mutual learning.

Rights of the Learning Community (always a partial list):

- You have the right to a safer learning environment. For many, you are away from home for the first time and that's overwhelming. Others are well acquainted with the culture of violence prevalent in today's society. Others still may not know what to think, and that's scary too. In here, no oppressive culture will be tolerated, which includes any actions, behaviors, statements, or microaggressions that proliferate or promote judgement based on sex, race, gender, creed, age, size, class, orientation, religion, physical or mental ability, or any other aspect of your identity. Should you, at any time, feel unsafe or unwelcome in our classroom (or the University as a whole), I encourage you to approach me in confidence.

- You have the right to direct and useful education. The purpose of education extends beyond the economic benefits typically touted by University propaganda; it increases our enjoyment and satisfaction of life and develops critical faculties to advocate for a better future. As members of a democratic society, the application of these goals determine your future impact on the world, for better or worse. So, should I, at any time, propose a course of action that feels distant or alien to you, I encourage you to speak up for you and your fellow students. It is entirely possible that, in my role as teacher, I occasionally lose sight of the reality of the students. I simply need reminding.

- You have the right to accessible learning. In addition to honoring all of the required accessibility guidelines provided by the university, I promise to make all materials as available as possible, in whichever forms are most accessible to the members of our classroom community. If the bureaucracy of disability services proves too burdensome or emotionally taxing, you may approach me directly. Together, we may develop a strategy for your success.

- You have the right to peaceably assemble. This is a constitutional amendment guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, which should be honored by all parts of a democratic society, including University classrooms. To honor this freedom, I acknowledge that this space is as much yours as it is mine. Should you and your classmates decide at any time that the coursework is irrelevant or that your time is being wasted, you may discuss and propose an alternative course of action. I will honor any reasonable student consensus, and redirect the course material to more appropriately match the realities of the student. Negotiation is among

the most difficult of democratic skills and I can hope, during a time of assembly, we may learn from one another through mutual respect.

Grading

Officially, it is my duty to assess what you “accomplish” in this class. However, I do sincerely believe that only you are capable of learning, and understanding what you learned for yourself. Your grade does not determine this. Structurally, 60% of the course grade will come from the collection of essays written during the next sixteen weeks. The remaining allotment of points, however, will be negotiated with the collective members of the class early in the semester. I do this because I believe that no momentary display of excellence (or test) will prove that you have learned anything “for keeps” or that is personally valuable and meaningful.

Grades typically only measure the instrumental value of knowledge. They undermine alternative perspectives and, if we are not careful, punish non-normative behavior. Personally, I am more interested in the social, civil, and cultural values associated with learning. Ironically, these things are not graded. They cannot be. Authentic learning — the type that stays with you forever — is not something that I or any educator can give you; learning is an active process that requires deep, personal engagement with the material. In short: all learning is discovery. It comes from the self in conversation with an educative community. I hope that this classroom will serve as that community.

Office Hours

You all enter this classroom with a different sets of skills. In virtue of this fact, I open my office to you as an extension of the classroom, including scheduled virtual meetings and individualized tutoring in the vast areas of academic writing and critical literacy skills. There is no shame or embarrassment in asking for help, although it is common to feel anxious in approaching one’s teacher. To enter my office and ask for help is an act of bravery. To enter and chat about nothing in particular often leads to new insight. Both are valuable. Both show that you trust me. I promise to respect you and earn that trust through compassionate listening and understanding. As a teacher, I know there is a power-relation between us. As best I can, I renounce this position. Think of me as human, imperfect and vulnerable just like you.

Attendance Policy

Class attendance is a symbol of solidarity with the fellow members of your classroom. Meaningful education requires a shared cultural experience and the readings, writings, and discussions that take place in this class serve as precisely that. In here, we will practice focus and singleness of mind; I encourage reflection and in acknowledgement of this aim I promise to reserve at least 50% of each class period for student participation and information processing.

To promote deep engagement with the course content, I encourage you, at any time, to stand up, walk around, or readjust your placement in the classroom. Learning is an embodied experience and an uncomfortable self quickly becomes an uncritical self. We will move often to keep our energy levels high and brains active. Your time is valuable and it is often challenging to critically engage with any one subject for too long. Should you find your focus lacking due to illness, outstanding personal crisis, or educative opportunity beyond my classroom walls, alternative learning arrangements may be negotiated. Of course, these alternatives must still meet the minimum University attendance requirements.

Course Objectives

You have met the objectives of this course when it no longer becomes essential that I teach the content. Critical literacy, the aim of this college composition course, is a lifelong skill with important humanitarian implications. It’s used daily, through your experiences with media and conversations with others.

Consider yourself successful in this class when you achieve a heightened awareness of the power-dynamics of language use (both written and verbal), and can successfully navigate this rough terrain in ways that are meaningful to your life. This is ambitious, I know. I want to empower you as humans, not as consumers, economical agents, or even students, because it is only as humans that we will ensure a better future for our world.

Together, we will learn to channel what you have already discovered about language: whether it was when you threw a tantrum in a supermarket so long ago, or later when you confessed your love to a high school sweetheart. I am confident in saying that at one point or another you have learned that words are powerful; that they can hurt or heal. Words can change the world. Critical literacy is humanity's superpower, and I hope to help you experiment with its potential.

I believe this is possible in sixteen weeks. So let's get started.

Hybrid Pedagogy *uses an open collaborative peer review process. This piece was reviewed by Chris Friend and Sean Michael Morris.*

This piece has been cross-posted on Keep Learning.